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USDA AND MINNESOTA LAUNCH PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFE, CLEAN RIVERS

BLOOMINGTON, MINN., February 19, 1998-- Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger and Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson today announced a joint federal-state initiative to help improve the quality of the Minnesota River. Rominger and Carlson signed an agreement forming a partnership called the Minnesota River Watershed Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).

"Today marks a turning point for improving the quality of the Minnesota River, making it a cleaner, safer, healthier river for everyone to enjoy and utilize," said Rominger. "In his Clean Water Action Plan announced today, President Clinton urged USDA to work with states to combine federal and state resources so that together we can offer people better, coordinated solutions to improve the quality of our water. Today, Governor Carlson, Senator Wellstone, Representative Minge, and USDA have met the President's challenge in Minnesota, now it's the responsibility of all landowners in the Minnesota River watershed to participate to make it happen."

CREP is a revolutionary new program using state and federal resources to help environmental problems. The CREP initiative combines an existing federal effort, the Conservation Reserve Program, which is administered by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) with Minnesota's Reinvest in Minnesota Reserve Program to retire up to 100,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land in the Minnesota River Valley.

"About 92 percent of the watershed is devoted to agricultural production, so farmers and ranchers will be a large part of the solution in helping to reduce nutrient and soil runoff into the river," Rominger said. "Landowners whose land is accepted into the program will install high-value, long-term conservation practices, such as planting native grasses and trees along the river and its tributaries, to filter sediment and other pollutants from water runoff. These measures can reduce the amount of sediment and nutrients reaching streams or rivers by as much as 90 percent."

In addition, enrollment will be targeted to certain frequently flooded cropland in the flood plain of the Minnesota River and its principal tributaries. The CREP will also help restore key wetlands and improve wildlife habitat in this watershed.

Under CREP, landowners and operators enter into 15-year CRP contracts with USDA. In return, they receive annual rental payments, incentive payments for certain activities, and cost-share assistance to establish the protective vegetation. In addition, the state will provide a lump-sum payment to purchase easements to maintain these conservation practices beyond the term of USDA's CRP contract.

If the full 100,000 acres are enrolled before the CREP expires on September 30, 2002, USDA estimates that the total financial obligation will be about \$223 million, \$163 million from the federal government and \$60 million from Minnesota.

Farmers and landowners can get more information about this program from their local USDA Service Center, Farm Service Agency office or Natural Resources Conservation Service office.

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